

O 011038Z SEP 09
FM AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4656
INFO AMEMBASSY BEIJING
AMEMBASSY KABUL
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY RIYADH
AMCONSUL KARACHI
AMCONSUL LAHORE
AMCONSUL PESHAWAR
CIA WASHINGTON DC
HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC

S E C R E T ISLAMABAD 002093

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/31/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [IN](#) [PK](#)

SUBJECT: GOP ANNOUNCES REFORMS TOWARD AUTONOMY FOR THE
"NORTHERN AREAS" IN SIGNAL TO INDIA TO JUMP START THE
BACK-CHANNEL

Classified By: Anne W. Patterson for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Prime Minister Gilani announced August 29 changes to the governance of Pakistan's "Northern Areas." The region will now be called "Gilgit-Baltistan" and enjoy most of the political arrangements of a province, less the right to representation in the Federal Parliament. Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Babar Awan said the changes had been made by the GOP for two reasons: to stem whatever appeal the taliban might enjoy among separatists in the Northern Areas; and to send a signal to India that Pakistan is serious about restarting the back-channel talks on the status of Kashmir. Jahangir Karamat, said Awan, would hopefully serve as Pakistan's point of contact for the back channel. The GOP could not go further in making reforms without amending the constitution; PM Gilani said "Gilgit-Baltistan" will not have the status of a province. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Prime Minister Gilani announced August 29 changes to the governance of Pakistan's "Northern Areas," the northern-most region of the country. The region under the new "Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Government Ordinance of 2009" will henceforth be known as "Gilgit-Baltistan." It will be granted many of the political arrangements of a province: including, a Governor appointed by the President; a Chief Minister; and a local assembly. Gilani made clear, however, that while the announced reforms are meant to constitute greater self-rule for the region, "Gilgit-Baltistan" is not a province.

¶3. (C) The region has been treated administratively as an adjunct to Pakistan-held Kashmir (AJK) and fell under the federal authority of the Minister for Kashmir and Northern Areas. While the reforms were greeted with praise by most political parties in Islamabad, they are not sufficient to meet the aspirations of the populace, which is cognizant it has no representation in the Federal Parliament.

¶4. (S) Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Babar Awan told PolCouns August 31 the changes had been made by the GOP for two reasons: to stem the appeal of talibanism/extremism to the separatist movement in the Northern Areas; and to send a signal to India that Pakistan wants to restart the back-channel talks on the status of Kashmir. Former Ambassador and COAS Jahangir Karamat, said Awan, would serve as Pakistan's point of contact for the back channel (assuming he accepted the position of National Security Advisor.)

¶5. (C) The government could go no farther in granting reforms, said Awan, as to do so would call for a change to Pakistan's Constitution. The area formerly known as the Northern Areas has had uncertain Constitutional status and its fate has been tied to that of AJK since the founding of the nation. While the status of the Northern Areas has been

held hostage to uncertainty over Kashmir and larger negotiations with India, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan believe they live in a region that is historically culturally and ethnically separate from AJK. They view the pre-partition rule of the Maharajah of Kashmir as only one in a series of foreign rulers, despite ethnic and cultural ties to the Buddhists of Ladakh. Activists for the Kashmiri cause, however, have already signaled their belief that granting the Northern Areas further autonomy only weakens Pakistan's claim on greater Kashmir. Historically, the Northern Areas vote was counted to uphold the contention that predominantly Muslim Kashmir belonged to Pakistan.

¶6. (C) An ethnically diverse, sparsely populated and impoverished part of Pakistan, Gilgit-Baltistan is sandwiched between the great mountain ranges of the Hindu Kush and the Karakoram on the north and the Himalaya on the south. An estimated 1.5 million people inhabit the 72,495 square kilometers that comprise the area. An ill-defined border with China's Xinjiang territory explains why residents in the far western corner of Gilgit-Baltistan (Ghanche) were worried this summer when conflict erupted between the government of China and Xinjiang separatists. The heavy presence of China in the region is generally regarded as a double-edged sword: the Chinese built the great Karakoram Highway that runs north from Gilgit to China and serves as the region's main artery (and its only modern highway, superseding the old Silk Road trail). But residents, who mostly live off subsistence agriculture (and tourism) fear Chinese designs on water and other resources.

¶7. (C) Gilgit-Baltistan, and particularly the city of Gilgit itself, has been the scene of sectarian violence. The region is largely Shia, with some portions Ishmaeli, while Baltistan is culturally tied to Ladhakh. The historically independent kingdom of Hunza is also part of the region. But village by village differences in language, religion and ethnicity abound. Calls for separatism have increased in recent years as some residents have argued that the lack of constitutional representation in Islamabad, the perceived indifference from the capital, and the instability of sectarianism (which some believe is instigated from outside the region) prove the region has no true political home in Pakistan.

¶8. (C) At the same time, certain villages have become Sunni, under the influence of the large number of inhabitants who have traveled to the Gulf for work and returned. Improvements to these villages, including the building of large mosques and an increase in conservatism, is attributed to (unspecified) "Saudi" funds. Some local Baltistan officials speculate that if the Taliban were to encroach in the region, their first in-roads would be in these villages. The GOP is working to make modest improvements to the economic situation of some of the regions' residents. Two subregions in the area have been selected to take part in the initial outlay of funds dispersed through the Benazir Bhutto income support program. "Gilgit-Baltistan," however, remains a dirt poor part of the nation. One local official in Karimabad said the greatest change in his lifetime was the universal use of shoes; this in a region with terrain that includes K-2, the world's second highest mountain, and the disputed Siachen glacier.

¶9. (S) Comment: The GOP's intention in making the reform is to signal to India Pakistan's willingness to jump-start the back-channel talks on Kashmir. The back-channel deal as it was being developed under President Musharraf would have granted the Northern Areas to Pakistan and ceded Indian-held Jammu and Ladakh to India. The actual reforms for self-rule, as they are being touted, will have some appeal to the residents of "Gilgit-Baltistan" who will appreciate, at a minimum, recognition of the name they themselves use to describe their home. Whether the reforms will meet the other purpose suggested by Awan, of blunting the appeal of Talibanism, remains to be seen.